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ABSTRACT

A Scottish study of foreign/second language instruction for vocational purposes focused on teaching methods, skill assessment methods, and teacher and student perceptions of the effectiveness of different instructional approaches. Nine case studies of second language programs (French, German, Japanese, and Spanish) were conducted. Programs provided instruction at beginning, intermediate, and advanced levels and of three types: customized language courses for a specific vocation; language options within vocational courses; and vocational subject courses for language specialists. The summary report of the study describes the study and its findings and draws conclusions concerning program design and implementation. Findings include descriptions of student and program staff populations, common teaching methods and materials, and student assessment approaches. A variety of practical considerations for program implementation are identified, including those for: creating a climate supportive of language learning; logistical arrangements (class location, scheduling, course preparation time, adequate instructional resources, staffing); establishing course objectives; selecting teaching methods; and evaluating student progress. (MSE)

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THE SCOTTISH OFFICE
Education Department

INTERCHANGE

No 25

Foreign Languages for Vocational Purposes in Further and Higher Education

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Foreign Languages for Vocational Purposes in Further and Higher Education

John Hall and Anne Bankowska

The Scottish Council for Research in Education

Background

There was a time, not so long ago, when the majority of foreign languages sections in further education colleges were confined to offering academically oriented Scottish Certificate of Education courses or their equivalents, often only as evening classes. Foreign language teaching was seen as being outside the vocational remit of such colleges. This has changed greatly in recent years and now the majority of further and higher education institutions offer language courses which are of a distinctively vocational character to students who are studying in a wide variety of subject areas, from Business Studies to Sport and Leisure and Engineering. This research was commissioned by the SOED as a first attempt to map out current developments in the provision of foreign languages teaching for vocational purposes in further and higher education, and to progress some of the issues identified in the report by HMI on Modern Languages in Further and Higher Education *(December 1991).*

The research project

The research set out to investigate:

- the teaching approaches which are currently used in the teaching of foreign languages in particular vocational contexts;
- the ways in which foreign languages skills are assessed; and
- teachers' and students' views on the effectiveness of different approaches to foreign language learning.

A series of case studies was conducted in institutions which provided courses covering:

- a range of vocational areas;
- a range of levels of courses (from uncertificated courses through to degree and postgraduate courses);
- a range of previous experience in providing foreign languages courses.

Between January and April 1993 nine case studies were conducted in both former central institutions (which had recently become universities) and in further education colleges. The courses which were the focus of the case studies fell into three broad categories:

- courses which were specifically tailored to meet the needs of those in employment whose jobs required them to develop foreign language skills. These were 'customised' courses for specific purposes.
- language options within vocational courses. These were 'general' courses not primarily intended for specialist language students;
- vocational subject courses for specialist language students who wished to develop their language skills in a vocationally oriented context (for example, marketing or business studies with languages).

The characteristics of the case study courses are shown in Table 1. In addition it should be noted that the languages being learnt by the students included Spanish and Japanese as well as the more expected French and German.

A wide range of language courses is now provided in further and higher education

To what extent are different sets of issues raised by different types of language courses?

Table 1. Characteristics of the case study courses

	No. of case studies	*Entry level*	*Qualification aimed for*	*Notes*
Group A	2	Beginner	None/ National Certificate	'Specific purposes' courses for particular companies
Group B	5	Beginner/ Intermediate	National Certificate/ Higher National Certificate or Diploma	Non-specialist language options within vocationally specific programmes
Group C	2	SCE Higher/ Degree	Degree/ Postgraduate	Vocationally oriented courses for language specialists

The students and the staff

The students in the case studies covered a wide range of ages and had a variety of previous experience of language learning — from those with no previous qualifications in the languages which they were currently studying, through to those with degrees in foreign languages. The 'experienced' language students tended to be doing their particular course because they were looking for a way of turning their expertise in languages into a marketable vocational skill by, for example, combining it with a course in marketing or business.

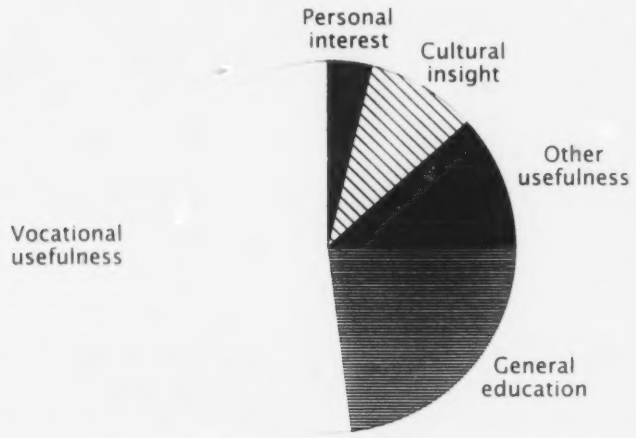
Vocational usefulness was a main reason for students choosing to study a foreign language

To what extent is there a market for students with foreign languages?

For the relatively more 'inexperienced' language students who formed the majority of the students in these case studies, the main reason for choosing to study a foreign language was the perceived vocational usefulness of acquiring some foreign language skills. This was the most important reason given by the majority of these students for opting into language classes (Figure 1).

Most of these students had fairly realistic expectations of the levels to which they might take their foreign language learning. The majority of those who were not languages specialists did not expect to achieve complete fluency but were rather looking to acquire a level of functional competence which would enable them to perform at a non-specialist level

Figure 1. Reasons which students gave as being 'most important' in their decision to study a foreign language



within their vocational area. These modest aspirations matched the expectations which the teaching staff had of these students.

There were some staff who felt that the traditional pattern of provision had lacked a middle level of functional, but not specialist, language learning, and that it was at this level that they were operating:

> *'A university linguist expects a reasonably good salary, whereas business want to pay people who can operate a telephone, which is basically a clerical grade ... I think there's a missing step ... the employers like them to be functional and operational.'*

There was a broad split in the case study institutions between those which had a reasonable complement of full-time teaching staff plus varying numbers of part-time staff and foreign language assistants, and those who relied to a very large extent on part-time staff. There were a number of problems associated with a high proportion of part-time staff. Part-timers were less likely to be given development time to help design or construct courses; they were likely to find it difficult to attend department meetings or consult with colleagues; and they were less likely to have access to a permanent classroom base, language laboratory or other audio or video equipment beyond basic tape recorders.

Some languages departments rely heavily on part-time teaching staff.

To what extent can this cause problems, and what can be done to alleviate them?

Teaching methods

Without exception, all of the case study institutions would claim to be teaching foreign languages using 'communicative' methods, which lay

stress on the meaning and use of language in realistic learning situations. The research team could find no reason to doubt these claims and evidence from the students supported the view that there was widespread use of practical, interactive and speech-based learning methods. The students also claimed that they found these methods particularly helpful. At the same time several teaching staff were careful to stress that they saw a useful role for the teaching of grammar and the written language. Some teaching staff were quite defensive about this, as if they feared that written language and grammar teaching might be thought to be incompatible with 'communicative' approaches. This is not so, provided that the study of the form and structure of the language is derived from an appreciation of its meaning and use, and is not so devoid of context as to become a collection of meaningless formulae to be learned by rote.

In practice, most respondents had a fairly pragmatic attitude to the inclusion of grammar teaching, without losing sight of the primary aim of promoting the ability to communicate in the foreign language:

> *'The keynote of the whole department is communicative competence ... but I also feel that it needs to be supported by a certain amount of grammar. The students can get by in communicating, but if you're wanting them to operate in fairly formal circumstances, they've also got to have a notion of accuracy.'*

Courses differed in the degree to which they were tailored to match the area of vocational study of the students.

The case study courses differed in the extent to which they were based on needs analyses of the student groups. In the 'customised' courses for students employed in particular industrial sectors, it was possible for the teaching staff to tailor the courses very closely to the needs of the students. In the more general beginners' courses, in which the student groups could be quite varied, this was less possible. Teaching staff also differed in the extent to which they thought that it was desirable to teach vocationally specific language to beginners. Nevertheless, there was some evidence to suggest that there were advantages to be gained in student motivation from tailoring the courses closely to their needs.

What advantages and disadvantages are there in vocationally specific language teaching?

Students also appreciated teaching materials which were tailored to their needs. In almost all cases the teaching staff produced their own teaching materials, many of which were rated as very helpful by the students. Commercially available textbooks were seen as useful in providing reinforcement and structure, but were not specific enough to be the sole resource.

Assessment

It was notable that all of the case study courses made some use of continuous assessment. In the further education colleges this tended to be the sole approach, while two of the newer universities retained an element of end of course examination alongside continuous assessment. Many of the courses were built around SCOTVEC National Certificate modules or

Higher National units and, to that extent, the use of some form of continuous assessment was a design feature of them. In general, however, most teaching staff stated that they favoured continuous assessment over end-testing for language learning no matter what the nature of the course provision.

Most teaching staff preferred some form of continuous assessment to end-examinations.

The problems which teaching staff encountered with assessment will be familiar to teachers of all subjects. There were complaints about the amount of assessment required; the demands made on the students; and the uncertainty about the required standard of assessment. These worries were particularly evident in SCOTVEC courses, but were not unique to languages teachers.

What do you see as the advantages and disadvantages of continuous assessment in language teaching?

Practical considerations for teaching staff and senior managers

A number of observations can be drawn from the case studies which teachers of foreign languages for vocational purposes in further and higher education may wish to consider. Some of these also have implications for senior managers of further and higher education institutions.

Getting the climate right

Many of the foreign languages departments in further and higher education institutions in this study found themselves performing a servicing role for other departments. In some instances staff felt that language learning was undervalued. They felt there was a lack of understanding of what is involved in language learning, and that unrealistic demands were sometimes placed on the languages department. However, some languages departments were trying to address them by capitalising on what they saw as latent interest in languages among their colleagues.

It is important that language learning should be valued by staff in other departments.

What can be done to promote the status of foreign languages within the institution?

Three examples of strategies used to promote interest in, and understanding of, foreign languages teaching included:

- Offering languages courses to staff in the institution as a staff development exercise.
- Offering languages courses on an 'open learning' basis to students in the institution.
- Offering translation and other language-related services to colleagues in the institution.

The perfect environment?

This study suggested that in the view of teaching staff, languages departments would ideally be based in a custom-designed languages suite, with a resource base tailored to the needs of students, ample time for course design and development, timetabling which did not place undue constraints upon teaching, and ample time for staff (both full-time and part-time) to meet, exchange ideas, and develop their teaching materials. Discussions with staff suggest that the following might contribute to a good language teaching environment:

Languages departments varied in the resources available and the constraints faced.

What factors do you think would contribute to an 'ideal' language teaching environment?

- A recognisable 'home base' devoted to the teaching of foreign languages. It was claimed that this could provide an environment in which foreign languages are seen to be important, allow ready access to resources, and help to promote interchange of ideas between staff.
- A timetable which is suited to the language learning needs of the students. Many languages teachers prefer their students to receive 'little but often'. However, if staff are faced with the constraints of, for

example, a three hour block once a week, it was the view of some staff that the block should, if possible, be broken into smaller, and more diverse, units of teaching.

Time available for the initial development of courses. It was the clear view of some staff that good vocational languages courses cannot be pulled 'off the shelf' and just 'slotted in' to the courses of other departments. Time is therefore required to plan and develop good courses.

Resources which are appropriate to the needs of the students. Reflection on the case studies suggests that the teaching materials which both staff and students are happiest with are those devised by the staff themselves. 'Set' textbooks may be a valued supplement, but few staff seem to have found the perfect textbook for their needs. Other valuable resources include audio and video equipment, but at the boundaries of technological innovation (for example computer-assisted language learning) there are enough grounds for caution to suggest that development is best left to those with the necessary knowledge and interest.

Part-time teaching staff who are fully integrated into the life of the department. A number of those interviewed felt that it was important to ensure that part-time staff are not denied access to classrooms, resources or equipment, and every effort should be made to allow them development time for new courses and to include them in department meetings.

Aims and focus of the course

It is not always possible to undertake a full needs analysis for all students, and even if it were, the mixed nature of some student groups would make it difficult to implement the results. Nevertheless, the case studies suggest that there are benefits to be gained from providing a clear vocational focus for the course. Not least is the opportunity to capitalise upon the vocational impulse which motivates many of these students:

Languages departments varied in the extent to which they conducted needs analyses of their students.

*How can a languages department best clarify **what** is to be learnt and **why** it is to be learnt?*

The course should be designed with a clear understanding of **what** the students need to learn and **why** they need to learn it.

The course should draw upon subject matter from the students' vocational subject area.

There are two schools of thought about the best approach to take with complete beginners: one approach stresses the need for 'general' language skills which are 'transferable' and will give the students 'coping strategies'; the other stresses 'vocationally specific' language which will be immediately relevant to the students and so motivate them. This is not an absolute dichotomy and the best approach will depend upon the needs of the student group.

Teaching methods

Most teachers of foreign languages for vocational purposes would already claim to be using communicative methods, and students appear to appreciate the active and participative teaching which they receive. Discussions with staff in the case study departments therefore suggest that the following general points should be made about teaching methods:

- Teaching should focus on the **meaning** and **use** of the target language in realistic situations relevant to the students.
- The extensive use of the target language in the classroom is valued by the students and should be encouraged.
- This does not preclude the teaching of grammar, nor does it imply any undue concentration on the spoken language to the exclusion of the written language.

'Communicative' approaches to languages teaching appear to be predominant.

What is the appropriate balance of teaching methods in vocational language teaching?

Assessment

The assessment problems faced by foreign languages teachers are not unique to them, but are shared with many of their colleagues in other departments. 'Assessment' can take many forms, and will vary in its degree of formality, depending upon circumstances and the purposes for which it is undertaken.

The following general points can be made about assessment:

- Foreign languages teachers are used to informal monitoring of the progress of their students. They should recognise that this is assessment which provides valuable information.
- Assessment should be thought of as a process of gathering evidence on the performance of the students, and not as 'tests'.
- Continuous assessment is preferable to an end-examination in that a much wider range of evidence can be gathered.
- Where National Certificate modules or Higher National units are being used, teachers should investigate the possibility of integrating the assessments for two or more outcomes into a single exercise.

The assessment problems faced by foreign languages teachers differ little from those faced by their colleagues in other departments.

How can the full range of appropriate assessment strategies be used by foreign languages teachers?

Full report of the study

Vocational Languages: Foreign Languages for Vocational Purposes in Further and Higher Education can be obtained from the Scottish Council for Research in Education, 15 St John Street, Edinburgh, EH8 8JR, price £6.00.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Scottish Office Education Department who funded the study.

Notes

Issues raised by language courses

Students' reasons for choosing course

Part-time staff in language departments

Tailoring courses to match students' needs

Continuous assessment in language teaching

Promoting the status of foreign languages in other departments

Factors contributing to an 'ideal' learning environment

Clarifying what is to be learnt and why

Appropriate balance of teaching methods

Problems of assessment in foreign languages

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